The Cinderella Code: Hidden Truths Behind College Basketball Mid-Majors and Their Runs to the Final Four

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

Matt Craig

Thesis Advisor

Chris Taylor

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

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Abstract

Every March, millions of people fill out NCAA Tournament brackets with the hope of predicting which small school will be the next impossible underdog to upset its opponents from much larger schools and live out its own Cinderella story in the Final Four, the sport's grandest stage. But what if we've been analyzing these teams incorrectly all along? Instead of using fairytales and sentimental reasoning to explain these occurrences, I have compared mid-major basketball teams that have made it to the Final Four in the modern era to the encounter between David and Goliath, the most famous underdog story in history, to uncover the idea of "desirable disadvantages." Each of the teams share a few common disadvantages that are the very reason for their success: A coach who's an outsider, players who are catalysts, an administration that has no choice but to put its support behind the men's basketball program, and a fearless attitude. Then I investigated the effects that these Final Four runs have on their respective universities as a whole, and use the given criteria to attempt to predict who the next mid-major to make the Final Four will be.

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If it wasn't for Seth Davis, who hired me to cover mid-major basketball for The Athletic during the 2017-2018 season, I would not have been interested in these underdog stories or built up a base of knowledge from which I could expand my research.

Lastly I feel as though thanks needs to be given to Malcolm Gladwell, who is my hero in the writing profession and whose style I have attempted to reproduce in this paper. Through his books he has given me a new way of looking at and explaining the world.

Process Analysis Statement

The creation of this thesis comes at the crux of two of my two personal passions, sports and storytelling. But it begins with an opportunity. During the 2017-2018 college basketball season, I had the good fortune to be hired by The Fieldhouse, a national college basketball publication under The Athletic's network of online subscription platforms, to cover mid-major basketball. On its face it might appear that I drew the short stick, being the youngest member of the staff and therefore having to cover the sport's lower conferences that my colleagues didn't want to bother with. Then as the six-month season progressed and I conducted hundreds of interviews with mid-major coaches and players, I developed a soft spot for the schools that do more with less. Their budgets were smaller, their players were shorter and less athletic, and there were far fewer fans in the stands watching them, but time and again I witnessed these schools competing and oftentimes beating their more privileged opponents from power conferences. In March of 2018, a small Jesuit school from the Missouri Valley Conference that I covered throughout the year made it all the way to the pinnacle of the sport at the Final Four, leaving in its wake a trail of large state schools with massive budgets. Naturally, I was drawn to ask how this was possible.

Around the same time, I was looking for a book to read. I had been a devoted fan of the work of Malcolm Gladwell for several years, reading his bestsellers *Outliers, Tipping Point,* and *Blink.* There was one I hadn't gotten around to yet, entitled *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants.* Somehow, I was not able to make the connection to mid-major hoops right away in my mind. I was more interested in learning what I could about Gladwell's unique style. He has the unparalleled ability to combine storytelling with well-researched theories seamlessly, unlocking a powerful brand of narrative that I was fascinated by. The two elements amplify the impact of one another. A theory can explain why a story happened the way that it did and be a predictor of future events happening under the same circumstances. Meanwhile a story can give both anecdotal proof to the theory's credibility, as well as hook the attention of a reader and get them emotionally invested in the application of the theory. With the

two tools working hand in hand, Gladwell can actually change the mind of a reader on a topic for which the reader assumed he had a firm understanding. Getting people to reject their preconceived notions is a nearly impossible task, so what he can do is basically a superpower in my mind. Gladwell unleashed these powers on me with his telling of the story of David and Goliath. As a devout Christian who grew up going to church and hearing the David and Goliath story numerous times, I was pretty sure that I had a firm understanding of what happened between the shepherd and the giant, how it happened, and why it happened. I was dead wrong. In the first 10 pages of the introduction, Gladwell turned my long-held beliefs upside down and introduced the idea that underdogs like David might actually have an advantage over behemoths like Goliath, not because they are secretly stronger or more powerful but *because* of their misunderstood weaknesses.

It was then that the light bulb came on in my head to make the connection with mid-major basketball. By applying Gladwell's theory about the advantages of being an underdog to college basketball, I would attempt to explain why upsets happened in the NCAA Tournament. Specifically, my scope was narrowed to the five mid-major teams that made it to the Final Four in the modern era. This initial decision was a simple one, because practically these five teams would have the most media coverage readily available to research on the internet, and I knew that both the reader and myself already had a base of knowledge from having watched these teams in our lifetimes.

The process of working on the paper was a learning experience on two levels. First, I needed to find and read every article, book, or explanation of why each team was able to reach the Final Four. It was here that I realized the extent to which writers and commentators are content to explain away these occurrences with magic or sentimentality, instead of digging into the objective reasoning the way they would if a more "worthy" team were to reach the same pedestal. There were very few hints to be found behind any one team, and certainly nowhere was there a unifying theory of mid-major success. I can still remember the first time I ran through the statistical lineups for each of the mid-major teams to make the Final Four and realized that not a

single one had star players who averaged a high number of points. This simple statistic ran counter to what I had always been told and believed about underdog basketball teams, and it was in that moment that I knew I was onto something with my research. Perhaps this could be a worthwhile and fresh contribution to the field. The other commonalities took more digging and synthesis of different scraps of information, but I firmly believe in the effectiveness of each trait I uncovered. The second level of learning was more meta, because while studying my actual subjects I also wanted to learn as much as I could about Gladwell's writing style, in the hopes that I could craft my own stories-plus-theories narrative. By chance Gladwell had just released his own "masterclass," an online course in which he attempted to explain his craft. Just as he did with his written work, Gladwell changed my entire perspective on the act of writing with his teaching. Instead of seeing writing as constructing sentences that flow together, he saw writing as fitting together puzzle pieces that simultaneously challenge a reader and produce "a-ha!" moments. That blew my mind. After binge-watching about seven hours of lectures and taking four pages of notes, I felt I had enough of a base of knowledge to attempt to begin writing my thesis.

Each writing session followed a specific routine. Instead of writing at my house, where I knew I would be distracted, I decided to go to the top floor of the library and sit in the corner where it was empty and quiet. As I walked to the library I would put headphones in and turn on my audiobook of Gladwell's *Outliers* in an attempt to pick up the pacing and lyricism of his writing voice. Then when I sat down I would open up *David and Goliath* and read a few pages, mapping out the sections as a way of reverse-engineering these puzzle pieces. Oftentimes an idea in the book would spark a train of thought that would lead to my work on the thesis, and away I went writing. I put my phone in my backpack, turned off the WiFi on my laptop and worked for several hours at a time.

Having now finished writing the thesis, I can see the many benefits of undertaking a project as ambitious as this one. If I continue to cover mid-major basketball, I have a huge base of knowledge of how the sport works at the lower level and even have a unified theory as to what

makes these type of teams successful, which I used in the to predict who the next teams will be to make the Final Four in the conclusion. Not only that, but I have a more refined writing style that I can apply to anything I might do, and better writing habits to be more efficient in my writing process. Lastly, I also have a pretty substantial product to present to interested college basketball fans who might be interested in the same things I'm interested in. If that's you, then I hope you enjoy "The Cinderella Code."

I. Introduction

When the University of Connecticut basketball team stepped on the court during the 2005-06 season, they knew they were the best team in country. Everyone who watched them knew it too. Three of their five starters stood 6-foot-9 or taller, forming a front line that was as impressive as it was intimidating. All five players were expecting to be selected after the season in the first round of the NBA draft, with star forward Rudy Gay receiving attention as a potential top pick. Heading into the season-ending NCAA Tournament, the Huskies had a record of 27 wins and three losses, punctuated by a commanding 14-point victory over No. 2 Villanova in the season's final weeks. Media experts and Las Vegas odds makers alike tabbed Connecticut as the odds-on favorite to win the national championship. A trip to the Final Four, the sport's biggest stage, was inevitable. The Huskies rolled through the first three rounds of the tournament, dispatching blueblood Kentucky in the second round and a Washington team led by top five NBA draft prospect Brandon Roy in the Sweet 16. Then they got a lucky break. Their Elite Eight opponent, the only team standing between them and the Final Four, was considered to be the least-talented team of any remaining in the tournament. Throughout the season Connecticut beat four teams ranked in the top 10 in the country, and this team was seeded No. 11 in its own quarter of the tournament bracket. The tallest player on their entire roster was 6-foot-7. In an interview live on ESPN before the game, Connecticut guard Rashad Anderson was asked if he could name any of the players on the opposing team. He admitted he couldn't.

It wasn't until a nine-point halftime lead evaporated in the game's final minutes that the Huskies realized they were in for a fight. The game went to overtime, and when the final buzzer sounded, the five short, no-name players were the ones hugging and celebrating. The unassuming team from the Colonial Athletic Association was going to the Final Four, after pulling off one of the greatest upsets in sports history. None of them would ever set foot on an NBA court or receive a million-dollar endorsement deals, but as two players climbed on top of the media table after the game and grabbed both sides of their green and gold jerseys to pump them out to the crowd, no one would ever forget the name written across the chest: George Mason.

What happened in the 2006 NCAA Tournament can probably be best summed up by a sign seen in the crowd that day. It read, "Goliath, meet David." The comparison to the most famous underdog story in history was appropriate. Just like the puny shepherd David, George Mason's players were physically small, and their talents were figuratively small in comparison to the unstoppable giant Connecticut. Perhaps most importantly in a sport where money and success are synonymous, George Mason's total athletics budget of $10 million was small, nearly five times less than that of Connecticut. And they hadn't just slain one Goliath. George Mason defeated four in a two-week span. In the opening round of the tournament they defeated mighty Michigan State, who had made it to the previous year's Final Four and was led by a first round NBA draft pick in Shannon Brown. Then they took down perennial power North Carolina, the defending national champions. A Wichita State team that was 26-8 on the season became the third victim, and finally the dominant Huskies. All of this happened in a season that began with a projected starter tearing his Anterior Cruciate Ligament and seemingly ending with an unceremonious conference tournament loss, leaving them in need of the conference's first at-large tournament bid in 20 years to even make it to the Big Dance.

There's never been a more quintessential underdog in the history of college basketball than George Mason. They became the first school not affiliated with a recognized power conference, a "mid-major," to reach the Final Four since the NCAA Tournament expanded to a 64-team field in 1985. In the 12 years following George Mason's run, four more mid-major underdog stories were written. Butler made back-to-back appearances in the Final Four in 2010 and 2011 out of the Horizon League, joined in 2011 by Virginia Commonwealth from the very same Colonial Athletic Association. In 2013 it was Wichita State from the Missouri Valley, followed by Loyola Chicago from the same conference in 2018. How did they do it?

Any explanation for these extraordinary runs by mid-majors quickly becomes fantastical. Loyola for example, was said to have won because its 98-year-old chaplain had a hotline to God. For Butler, the ghosts of Milan High School and the subsequent 1986 film *Hoosiers* were invoked. In 2006, Connecticut head coach Jim Calhoun could only describe what George Mason

did as a "magic carpet ride," in reference to the 1992 Disney movie *Aladdin*. Through the years, the rest of the country has chosen another Disney fairytale to explain these occurrences: *Cinderella*. In each a humble hero receives magical powers and transcends his or her status to overcome an impossible challenge. In the case of David and Goliath, taking down the giant required divine intervention.

But what if it wasn't magic? In 2013, best-selling author Malcolm Gladwell investigated the duel between David and Goliath with an objective eye. His conclusion was that almost everything we believe about David defeating Goliath is wrong. Sure, Goliath was a man of immense stature and strength. He could not be matched in hand-to-hand combat. And yes, David was small, had no armor and was armed with just a sling and some stones. But David had no intention of fighting by Goliath's rules. He was a projectile warrior, with the ability to fire a rock at the force equivalent to a modern handgun with pinpoint precision directly at Goliath's most vulnerable point. The scriptures and modern medical experts agree Goliath likely suffered from acromegaly, a pituitary gland tumor that caused an overproduction of human growth hormone, which compressed his optic nerves and likely left him functionally blind. He couldn't see the projectile coming. In the book, Gladwell captures a powerful quote from historian Robert Dohrenwend:

"Goliath had as much chance against David as any Bronze Age warrior with a sword would have had against an [opponent] armed with a .45 automatic pistol."

From this comes Gladwell's concept of "desirable disadvantages." David did not defeat Goliath because of magic. He also didn't win because he was the more powerful warrior. He wasn't. He was simply the appropriate warrior, with the right weapon and the right strategy, to defeat an opponent that overlooked him. The very same attributes that were seen conventionally as handicaps made him mighty.

Let's return to Washington D.C. in the spring of 2006 with fresh perspective. Here's what George Mason head coach Jim Larrañaga said as he scouted his two potential Elite Eight opponents: "I wanted to play [Connecticut]. I did not want to play [their Sweet 16 opponent]

Washington." What? Why would he want to play the best team in all of college basketball? He continued, "The University of Connecticut was very similar to Michigan State and Carolina. They were very big. Big teams will very often play behind in the post. We had two of the best offensive post players in America in Jai Lewis and Will Thomas. So I knew we were going to be able to throw the ball into them." Larrañaga knew Lewis and Thomas were not as talented or as tall as Connecticut's Hilton Armstrong and Josh Boone, who would be taken 12th and 23rd respectively in the NBA Draft a few months later. Thomas really only had one post move, a turn around left hook shot. But to his credit, if he got it off it was going in. And despite Lewis being nearly 300 pounds, he had light feet and a sweet mid-range jump shot that could catch unsuspecting opponents off-guard. Connecticut's big men weren't prepared for either. By their own admission, they didn't even know their names. Just like Goliath, Connecticut's size and strength had made them blind. "I'd be less than candid to say I feared George Mason a lot more than my players did," Calhoun said. "That's only normal."

Connecticut was so blind, in fact, that in the second half George Mason simplified its offense down to a single play. "We ran the same play 25 consecutive times. We didn't change one thing on offense. We didn't make one adjustment at all," Larrañaga said. The play started on the right side of the floor behind the three-point line, then the ball was passed over to the left side and dumped down low to the left block for Lewis or Thomas, who combined to score nearly half of the Patriots' points in the game. One George Mason assistant coach was dumbfounded, and remarked, "The bench, we just kept sitting there and asking, 'Why are they not double-teaming him?'"

George Mason didn't even make a substitution in the final 15 minutes of regulation, as all five starters stayed on the floor and contributed double-digit scoring efforts consistent with their balanced season averages. They were working together seamlessly, unlike the self-destructing Huskies, who were heard yelling 'Pass me the f----g ball!" repeatedly at one another. Unlike many other opponents, George Mason intimidated by the reputation of the Connecticut players. Before the game, Thomas shared with his teammates that his record against Connecticut star

Rudy Gay stood at seven wins and zero losses, as his high school team in Baltimore had beaten Gay's each time they met, including twice for the local Catholic league championship. "I never lost to him in high school, not planning to lose to him in college," he said.

As the game progressed and the possibility of an upset grew, George Mason had another ally. The crowd. A George Mason team that hadn't sold out their 10,000-seat arena in Fairfax a single time during the season was playing in front of 18,000 fans at the Verizon Center. All were pulling for the Patriots. "There were times we couldn't even hear Coach L in the huddle," said George Mason guard Lamar Butler. The crowd was behind George Mason for more than just their underdog status. The Verizon Center, located in downtown Washington D.C., was no more than 25 miles from George Mason's campus. What's more, all five starters grew up in close proximity to the area. Tony Skinn was from Takoma Park, seven miles from the arena; Lamar Butler was from Oxon Hill, 11 miles south; Will Thomas was from Baltimore, 40 miles east; Folarin Campbell was from Silver Spring, 11 miles north; and Jai Lewis was the farthest from his hometown of Aberdeen, just past Baltimore about 70 miles away. This was literally the hometown team. Mark Turgeon, coach of the Wichita State team that George Mason eliminated in the same arena two days before facing Connecticut, said after the loss, "I knew it was going to be a road game, but I didn't think it was going to be 16,000 George Mason fans in there. And I just remember how loud and wild [it was], and how loose George Mason's team was and excited to be there. We really didn't have any chance."

Does George Mason's upset of Connecticut seem like magic now? Of course not. The same applies to our other mid-major "Cinderellas." Butler, VCU, Wichita State and Loyola Chicago did not win four consecutive NCAA Tournament games against the top teams in the country and advance to Final Four because they were lucky, or wondrously operating above their capacity. Sentimentality might make for a tidy narrative, but it's a stale and ultimately inadequate way to explain how these programs were able to reach the pinnacle of college basketball despite inferior talent, unconventional tactics and inadequate resources. What follows

is an investigation of the real reasons why these miraculous runs happened, the eccentric characters behind them, and the impacts they produced.

II. Fighting Like David

Shaka Smart's mother wanted to name him Brian, or something more ordinary. But his father insisted on naming him after Shaka Zulu, a South African war hero who innovated combat techniques in the 19th century. Smart likes having a unique name. He likes being different. In retrospect, he says that's about the only good thing his father ever did for him.

A native of Trinidad, Smart's father was an academic with four college degrees and zero interest in raising a family. He was gone by the time Smart was two years old, coming back into the picture for a few of his high school years before leaving for good. Smart's mother was from upper-middle-class Chicago, and raised Smart and his three siblings by herself on a teacher's salary. She was tough, yet fair. Growing up as a biracial kid in the small town of Oregon, Wisconsin, Smart was simultaneously too white and too black for his peers. He didn't fit in with either. In the eighth grade that meant playing on two different basketball teams, one all-black and the other all-white, unbeknownst to each other. He embraced it. "It was basketball, which I loved. But culturally it was so very different. Just the way people talk, the way they interact, the coaching," he says.

Though he was obsessed with the sport, he excelled more off of the court than on. He always earned impeccable academic marks. When it came time to decide on a college, he had acceptance letters from Harvard, Yale and Brown lining his inbox. The conventional decision would be the Ivy League. Instead, Smart picked Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. There he could fulfill his dream of playing college basketball, even if it was only at the Division III level after Division I programs passed over the slender 5-foot-10 point guard. He was a four-year starter, a three-year captain, set the program record for assists and graduate magna cum laude with a degree in history.

He could've done anything, even considering a career in academia, but when his former college coach and father figure, Bill Brown, offered him a graduate assistant coaching job at California University of Pennsylvania, Smart was hooked. He picked up a master's degree in social science there and more importantly a love of coaching. Over the next decade he made stops as an assistant coach at Dayton, Akron, Clemson and Florida. All of his bosses noticed the same thing. "He's an intellectual genius," says Keith Dambrot, his boss at Akron. "A really smart, out of the box thinker."

Smart didn't fit into any box. He'd been told he was too white, too black, too smart, too small, and most off all when he was named the head coach of Virginia Commonwealth in May of 2009, too young. He was 32 years old.

Pretend for a moment that you're the athletic director at a university in a mid-major conference and you're looking to hire a young basketball coach. Would you have hired Smart? As you make that decision, history tells you to look for some very specific traits.

Hall of fame college basketball coaches all follow a pretty clear career path. It starts with playing high-level college basketball, where you have the chance to gain credibility and build relationships with other influential people in the industry. The next step is to become an apprentice under a great coach and spend years soaking up their wisdom and coaching technique. Roy Williams for example, before winning three national titles as the coach at North Carolina, played for the Tar Heels for one season and then coached for a decade under all-time great Dean Smith. The knowledge was passed through coaching generations. Smith was coached by Phog Allen, known as "The Father of Basketball Coaching." Allen was coached by James Naismith, the man who invented the sport of basketball. It's a system that's proven to work.

Bill Self is another perfect example. Before amassing the 14 conference titles, three Final Fours and the one national championship he currently holds as the head coach of powerhouse Kansas, Self played basketball at Oklahoma State. He had experience participating in the NCAA Tournament as a player in 1983. Upon graduating, he got his first coaching job at Kansas under Larry Brown, a hall of famer and the only head coach ever to win an NCAA Championship and

an NBA Championship (Brown unsurprisingly played his college ball at North Carolina for Dean Smith). That year, the Jayhawks went 35-4 and advanced to the Final Four. Then Self spent seven years on staff at Oklahoma State, the majority of which was for Eddie Sutton, another legendary coach who totaled over 800 career wins. By the time mid-major program Oral Roberts gave Self his first head coaching position at the age of 30, he had already played or coached in five NCAA Tournaments, and in those tournaments had advanced to two Sweet 16s and one Final Four. For comparison, Shaka Smart had been to a single NCAA Tournament at the same point in his career. And his 2008 Clemson Tigers hadn't made it past the first round. As an athletic director, would you rather hire someone with the résumé of Self, or Smart?

VCU decided on Smart. And they never reach the 2011 Final Four if they hadn't. He didn't fit the mold, and had no interest in doing so. "I just never really fit in, so I was always trying to create an identity for myself where I didn't have to worry about whether I fit with people around me or the way I was being perceived," Smart said. Based on the upbringing and background he had, he was never going to coach conventionally.

In college basketball, there's a certain way teams are *supposed* to play defense. It's man-to-man, half court, with each defender keeping their individual opponent in front and not reaching in for a steal where they might foul. Smart wasn't interested in that. Immediately he implemented two separate full court press defenses, used every possession for all 40 minutes of every game. His players would run, jump, trap, gamble, and try to force turnovers. And unlike other teams that might use full court defenses in stretches, Smart's defense didn't let up when a team advanced the ball past mid court, shifting into a half court trapping defense to continue the pressure. On offense, Smart directed his players to attack quickly. All players had the green light to fire up shots within the first few seconds of a possession, before defenses could get set up and shooters could second guess their ability. Their motto was A-C-L: aggressive, confident, and loose. It ran counter to the prevailing wisdom of the time, which stated that methodical offensive actions should lead to an earned shot. VCU's goal was disruption. "We're going to wreak havoc

on our opponents' psyche, and their plan of attack," Smart said as he laid out the plan at his introductory press conference.

"Havoc" caught on as a buzzword for the hellish experience VCU put opponents through on both ends of the court. In his first season the Rams finished 27-9, including five straight victories to clinch the College Basketball Invitational Tournament Championship at the end of the season. In the finals against a Saint Louis team led by Rick Majerus, renowned for his disciplined brand of basketball, the Rams recorded 12 steals.

Smart and VCU were fighting like David. It's a strategy that requires boldness by the coach, a willingness to take risk and go against the grain. Crucially, it requires a coach who's an outsider. Smart didn't play Division I basketball. His coaching mentors were Keith Dambrot and Oliver Purnell, neither of whom has ever coached at a power conference program, and one season under Billy Donovan. He hadn't been indoctrinated in the way things ought to be. The career path of Williams, Self, or many other great coaches is excellent at training up Goliaths. But wanna-be Goliaths at mid-major schools with $10 million budgets don't beat actual Goliaths at powerhouse programs with $50 million or more to spend. They don't reach the Final Four.

Smart isn't the only example. Brad Stevens was an economics major at DePauw University who barely found the floor as a senior on their Division III basketball team. Out of college, he took a job analyzing metrics to determine performance incentives at Eli Lilly, a global pharmaceutical company. His heart wasn't in it, so he quit for an unpaid volunteer coaching position at the local school, Butler. Within 10 years he was coaching for a national championship. His background in numbers led to the pioneering of advanced analytics in the sport. The coach that led Wichita State to the promised land in 2013, Gregg Marshall, played at Division III Randolph-Macon and did his understudies at his alma mater, Belmont Abbey, College of Charleston, and Marshall, totaling a single unsuccessful trip to the NCAA Tournament. Thinking unconventionally was second nature to him by the time he took the head job at Winthrop, and later Wichita State.

Even George Mason coach Jim Larrañaga and Loyola coach Porter Moser, who played Division I basketball for Providence College and Creighton respectively, had to go through some hardship to be shaken from the traditional way of thinking. After serving as an assistant at Virginia, Larrañaga's head coaching career began with an unimpressive 170-144 record at lowly Bowling Green. The box of convention wasn't working, so he abandoned it. During his tournament run in 2006 he was open to receiving coaching tips from even his two sons. In the second round win over North Carolina his plan was to pressure freshman point guard Bobby Frasor, but his sons told him to wait until after halftime when UNC coach Roy Williams couldn't adjust for it at halftime. "I thought it was a brilliant suggestion," he said. The Patriots turned a seven-point halftime deficit into a five-point victory. That same season Moser was struggling through a 9-19 season as the head coach at Illinois State. He was fired after three losing seasons in four years, and was forced to return to the assistant coaching ranks under Rick Majerus at Saint Louis (where he was on the receiving end of Smart's Havoc defense in the 2010 CBI finals). He reinvented his coaching philosophy, discovering the offensive principle of "point five," an idea that offensive players shouldn't hold the ball for more than half a second before passing or cutting. Asking a player to avoid isolating their defender one-on-one would be ludicrous at a power conference school, but it became a key in his 2018 Loyola team making the Final Four.

If you're the athletic director at a mid-major school looking to hire a young coach, whom do you pick now?

There are two reasons why most college basketball teams do not run Smart's Havoc defense, despite its effectiveness. The first is that it's really difficult. Studies suggest that the average basketball player runs close to three miles in a game. It's not unreasonable to project that number to be greater than five miles per game with a team that is full court pressing like VCU. To prepare to play in that style, the players must be in incredible shape. In line with his unconventional thinking, before each season Smart took his team to train with Navy SEALs for five days, a "hell week" that combined team building with intense conditioning. Back on the

court, practices weren't much easier. Every drill was competitive, and losers ran. One of Smart's signature drills, called the "Iron Man," involves a player taking a charge—essentially letting another player run over him—before getting up and sprinting to the sideline to dive for a loose ball, then getting up and sprinting to the other sideline to save a ball from going out of bounds. In addition to high-intensity drills, Smart forced teams to run from one drill to the next, not giving them time to relax and catch their breath. "Nobody really wants to do that," admitted VCU guard Ed Nixon. Most coaches can't push their players that hard without making them resent him.

Smart wasn't most coaches. He was 32 years old, too young to be out of touch. "He's one of the guys," said point guard Joey Rodriguez, who recalls being in the car on the way to the first team dinner after Smart's hiring when the young coach popped in a hip-hop CD and started singing along. "I was like Coach, you listen to this?" Smart sought out the players to talk about life outside of the game. He jumped into drills and compete shoulder-to-shoulder with his players. He and his whole staff went through every activity with the players during "hell week" training with the SEALs. He even did the Iron Man drill a few times. While he may never have had the opportunity to study under a hall of fame coach, he had learned from Kenyon coach Bill Brown that a college basketball coach could become a father figure for young student athletes. By becoming one for his players, he could demand more from them. He could demand Havoc.

The second reason why most teams don't implement risky pressure defense is that it can be figured out. It's simple math. If a defense chooses to position two players up guarding the opposing player with the ball 90 feet from their own basket, and two more defenders nearby to intercept passes, it leaves just one defender back. A well-prepared opponent can make the right combination of passes to expose that final defender. If Havoc isn't able to cause havoc, it surrenders easy baskets every time. VCU learned this in Smart's second season in Richmond in 2010-11. The defense wasn't surprising anybody anymore, especially when the team reached conference play, where opposing players and coaches were most familiar. The Rams finished the season by losing four of their final five games, only forcing 10.4 turnovers per game in those

contests, down from nearly 15 per game on the season. The Rams fell in the finals of the conference tournament, missing their change at an automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament.

No one thought VCU deserved an at-large bid. Smart didn't even gather his team to watch the selection show together to avoid a letdown. In any year prior, they definitely wouldn't make it. But 2011 was the first year the NCAA implemented the "First Four," a four-team expansion event that serving as a qualifier for the field of 64. Even VCU's selection to the First Four was controversial. On ESPN's broadcast after the bracket reveal, longtime college basketball analyst Dick Vitale likened the selection committee's choice of VCU over Colorado and Virginia Tech to a beauty contest between Roseanne Barr and Scarlett Johansson. He said his wife could tell the difference. Fellow ESPN analyst Jay Bilas agreed: "These were bad decisions. And we talk about the eye test, this [selection] doesn't pass the laugh test."

Once VCU entered tournament play, teams that had never seen VCU play were forced to game plan for Havoc on short notice. VCU played its First Four game on Wednesday night, less than three days after the selection show. After defeating USC, No. 6 seed Georgetown had less than 48 hours to figure out how to break the press in the round of 64. They weren't able to, turning the ball over 17 times and getting blown out 74-56. The fast-paced offense was rolling by that point, and in the next two rounds the Rams combined to hit 19 threes and score over 160 points. Thanks to some desirable disadvantages, VCU was in the Elite Eight.

The team standing between them and the Final Four was none other than No. 1 seed Kansas, led by traditionally-trained Bill Self. The Jayhawks were 35-2. "They seemed, when you looked at them initially, invincible," said VCU assistant coach Mike Jones. "But what we were able to discover is that the things that we were good at, they were not good at. They were not good in transition. We were great in transition. They were not good at ball-screen defense. We were great at ball-screen offense. And they didn't handle pressure well." What Jones was saying, essentially, was that Kansas had a big gap in their helmet, right at forehead level, just asking for a stone to be fired in there like a .45-caliber pistol. The Rams held Kansas to 35 percent shooting, a paltry 2-of-21 from three-point distance, and forced them into 14 turnovers. After

weathering a second-half comeback, the final score indicated a convincing 71-61 victory. A ticket was punched to the Final Four. A giant was felled. Just don't call it a Cinderella story.

III. The Unassuming Shepherd Boy

When you think about the type of player you find on a mid-major team capable of surprising the college basketball world and making the Final Four, you're probably envisioning someone like Gordon Hayward. As a skinny kid barely pushing six feet tall when he entered Brownsburg High School in the western suburbs of Indianapolis, Hayward wasn't even thinking about college basketball. He even considered quitting the sport to focus on his tennis career. He grew to 6-foot-3, and still nobody was recruiting him. He grew to 6-foot-5, and a small school on the north side of town with a young coach named Brad Stevens offered him a scholarship. That school was Butler. Soon after he broke his wrist, limiting his ability to play travel basketball in front of scouts, and despite the fact that he had grown to 6-foot-8 with the skillset of a superstar, none of the bigger programs in the area took notice until it was too late. Butler landed a diamond in the rough. After his freshman season there were murmurs about him leaving for the NBA. The following year he won Horizon League Player of the Year and led Butler to the 2010 National Championship game, which coincidentally was played at Lucas Oil Stadium in downtown Indianapolis. As the final seconds counted down, he heaved up a shot for the championship from 46 feet and came three inches away from authoring the greatest moment in college basketball history. The shot missed, but Butler still went down in history as the smallest school to play for a national title in over 50 years, and the first program from the unappreciated Horizon League to advance past the Sweet 16. A few months later, Hayward was drafted ninth overall in the 2010 NBA Draft.

Butler's run in 2010 can be easily explained then. They possessed a secret weapon, a player who could've been a star on any team at a bigger school but ended up by chance at a mid-major program, and by sheer force of will carried his inferior teammates to victory. This sort of thinking lines up perfectly with how most college basketball championships are won, on the

backs of one-or-more mega-talented players who team up at a powerhouse school to shine brightest on the sport's biggest stage. Behind each Cinderella story we expect to find someone like Hayward. We think of Steve Nash or Steph Curry, both of were two-time winners of the NBA Most Valuable Player award, playing for tiny schools Santa Clara and Davidson. Or Damian Lillard, the sixth overall pick in the 2012 NBA Draft coming from Weber State. These people didn't belong at such small schools. But after being overlooked or mischaracterized, they carried their respective teams to glory by their individual greatness. Right?

How then do you explain Lillard's team never qualifying for the NCAA Tournament? How come Nash never took Santa Clara past the second round? Even Curry going full supernova in the 2008 tournament wasn't enough to propel Davidson past the Elite Eight, when Kansas bottled him up and his teammates were unable to pick up the slack. Curry opted to return to school the following season and was unable to make it back to the NCAA Tournament. Or how do you explain Hayward himself only averaging an unspectacular 15.8 points per game during Butler's run in 2010? You can't. And you certainly can't explain what happened to Butler in 2011.

To be clear, nobody considered the 2010 Butler team a Cinderella. Despite the size of their school and their modest conference affiliation, the Bulldogs were ranked No. 11 in the country in the preseason AP Top 25 poll. With a star like Hayward and all five starters returning from a 26-win team the previous season, everyone knew Butler was going to be good. At season's end they were ranked No. 12, and their 28-4 record wasn't sneaking up on anybody. Even though they were undervalued as a No. 5 seed in the West Region, many experts predicted them to make a deep tournament run. Sure, making it all the way to the national championship game was a surprise, but these victories were far from David versus Goliath.

Butler's 2011 team was a different story. In early February the Bulldogs were sitting at 14-9 and coming off of three straight losses to pedestrian Horizon League competition. Their only hope of making it to the Big Dance was to win the conference tournament and capture the automatic bid. If they managed to do that, they couldn't possibly hope to make a run without

Hayward. A new hero emerged. With a head of greasy, curly long hair and a daily wardrobe that included socks so old that the elastic had lost all tension, this hero was the exact opposite of who you'd expect as the leader of a Final Four-caliber basketball team. He probably looked just as ridiculous as David did, descending down into the Valley of Elah to fight a giant without wearing armor or carrying a shield. In comparison to Hayward, sportswriter Rick Reilly said this hero "look[ed] more like a geeky band-camp RA than a possible NBA first rounder." This hero's name was Matt Howard.

The first image that pops into people's heads when they think of Howard isn't a celebration, a made shot, or even an epic missed shot the way it is for Hayward. It's a bloody nose. Ok, a bloody nose is underselling it. During a February game in 2011 against the University of Illinois-Chicago, four days after his team had suffered its third consecutive loss and looked doomed, Howard was fighting underneath the basket for positioning when he was elbowed in the face. He fell to the ground. Play stopped. When he rose to his feet moments later, blood was streaming from his nose and a cut above his eye, painting the entire left side of his face red. It looked like a scene out of a horror movie. The Bulldogs won the game, and didn't stop winning for the rest of the regular season, conference tournament, or NCAA Tournament either. Nothing can more perfectly represent all that Howard brought to the Butler program than the fact that he literally shed blood for a victory.

Growing up in Connersville, Indiana as the eighth of 10 children, Howard learned qualities like humility, hard work, and patience at an early age. Connersville is a small town of just over 13,000 people, one of many post-industrial midwestern cities with a boarded-up downtown after the abandonment of a Ford factory, once the town's biggest employer. The Howards weren't rich. In his first childhood home there was just one bathroom. "Can you imagine that with five sisters?" Howard said. "That's some intense sharing." His first job was delivering newspapers at age nine, following the example of his father, who worked as a mail carrier for 33 years and only took one sick day. By the time Howard was 16, he saved enough

money from the newspaper deliveries and mowing lawns to afford his own car and insurance, all while earning perfect grades in school.

On the basketball court, the 6-foot-8 Howard was a town hero. He could score both inside and outside and was praised endlessly for "playing the game the right way," scrapping after loose balls and always sharing the ball with his teammates. Yet he was uncomfortable with the celebrity, including one instance where he declined to reenter during the fourth quarter of a high school game in which he needed just two more points to break the school record. That didn't stop premier colleges from calling, but eventually Howard became the first top-100 recruit ever to play basketball at Butler. He didn't much care for the offers he received from larger schools, picking Butler because it had the same "small school, big gym" feel as Connersville, and because he wanted to play with summer teammate Zach Hahn.

Howard's indifference towards stardom held true in his time at Butler. His impact for the Bulldogs was immediate, winning the conference's Newcomer of the Year trophy as a freshman, and in his sophomore season in 2008-09 he took home the Horizon League Player of the Year award. Then, without reservation, he surrendered primary scoring duties to Hayward the following season for the good of the team. In the classroom, he maintained a 3.77 grade point average as a finance major, and in his senior season was named the Academic All-American of the Year. "He's the best on the court, the best in the classroom. He's Mr. Everything," teammate Ronald Nored said. "You'd hate him if he weren't so nice."

Off the court, Howard was just as singular. He rode to practices and classes on a rusted out bicycle all year, regardless of snow or icy Indiana winters. He got his hair cut only once per year, by a friend who did it for free. During the 2010 tournament run, he vowed not to shave his patchy mustache until his team lost. Then there were those socks. Howard wore the same pair of socks and shoes every day at the gym, until the elastic had stretched and the socks drooped down to his ankles. Teammates dubbed them the turtleneck socks. "They're terrible, awful, a complete embarrassment," said Nored, but Howard didn't much care. "There's nothing wrong with them. It's not like they have holes or anything. They're not fashionable, I suppose, but then again, I'm

not a very fashionable person," Howard said. His shoes were in similar condition. "He has six pairs of brand-new shoes in his locker," teammate Shelvin Mack said. "But he won't wear them! He just keeps wearing those ratty old ones." A few teammates called him a minimalist, but he preferred the term low-maintenance.

One thing nobody could ever label him was selfish. Howard scored more than 20 points just eight times during the 38 games of his senior season in 2010-11. But he was a hero for the Bulldogs nonetheless, leading a true underdog into the 2011 NCAA Tournament as a No. 8 seed. In its opening round game against No. 9 seed Old Dominion, when the game was tied in the final seconds and there was a scramble underneath the opposing basket, it was Howard who ran in and grabbed the ball, scoring on a wild shot at the buzzer for the win. Two days later, Howard again was called on to make a free throw with the game tied and less than a second on the clock to beat No. 1 seed Pittsburgh. He nailed it. In the Sweet 16 round, when the team needed him to put up a monster performance against No. 4 seed Wisconsin, he responded with 20 points and 12 rebounds. Then in the Elite Eight when Shelvin Mack had the hot hand, Howard backed off, finishing with an efficient 14 points. Under the bright lights of the Final Four he made 11-of-12 free throws to close out VCU, landing Butler once again in the National Championship game against all odds.

It turns out, the type of player you find on a mid-major team capable of surprising the college basketball world and making the Final Four is someone like Matt Howard. His 16.4 points per game average in 2011 is actually the highest scoring average of any player on any of the five mid-major teams to reach the Final Four. Across all those teams, there have only been four players who have ever suited up for an NBA game. Only two of those got drafted. And none of them ever averaged more than eight points per game in an NBA season. These were not superstars in disguise.

George Mason's leading scorer was Jai Lewis at just 13.7 points per game. Below him were the four other starters, all of whom averaged between 11 and 13 points. VCU's Final Four team had a similar spread, with four players averaging between 11 and 15 points. In fact, the

Rams lost two NBA first-round picks in the two drafts prior to the 2010-2011 season. Eric Maynor was taken 20th in 2009 and Larry Sanders 15th in 2010. The farthest either of those two got was the first round of the NCAA Tournament. When they left, VCU went to the Final Four. Butler suffered the loss of a superstar in Hayward, but returned to the national championship game behind four players averaging between eight and 16 points. Wichita State had three between 10 and 14 points on its Final Four team of 2013. The Shockers' roster was a band of misfits, with two transfers from other schools and five coming from junior college, carrying a healthy collective chip on their shoulders. And finally there's Loyola in 2018, which also had five players scoring more than 10 points but none more than 13.2 per game. How can that be?

The Butler basketball program actually has a name for this phenomenon of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. They call it the "Butler Way." The Butler Way originated at a summer coaching retreat in 1995, when the coaches of Butler, Wisconsin, and Bowling Green met to share ideas and philosophies. Butler's coach at the time was Barry Collier. Wisconsin was led by Dick Bennett. And Bowling Green's coach was none other than Jim Larrañaga, prior to taking the job at George Mason. Larrañaga showed up with 107 pages of notes, emphasizing principles "not that you coach by, but that you live by." From this, Collier adopted five core pillars: humility, passion, unity, servanthood, and thankfulness. Collier coached at Butler until 2000, and in that time he built the foundation for applying these pillars to every aspect of the program. The Butler Way governed which recruits were brought in, how much playing time players received, and how the team conducted its business off the court. In 2006, Collier returned to the school as the new athletic director. He was the one to hire a 30-year-old Brad Stevens in 2007. The next fall, Matt Howard showed up on campus, a living embodiment of the Butler Way.

Michael Lewis, best-selling author of books like *Liar's Poker, Moneyball and The Big Short,* has a name for players like Howard. In a 2009 profile of NBA player Shane Battier, the closest equivalent to Howard on the NBA level, he coined the term "No Stats All-Stars." Lewis said, "Battier's game is a weird combination of obvious weaknesses and nearly invisible

strengths. When he is on the court, his teammates get better, often a lot better, and his opponents get worse — often a lot worse." Put enough players like Battier together on one team, Lewis surmises, and you've got a winning team. That's essentially what Butler did in 2010 and 2011. A professor of management at the school spent several years studying the Butler Way, and concluded that players like Howard "are literally catalysts - agents that provoke a chemical reaction between substances that would otherwise have no effect on each other. Butler has a higher percentage of catalyst players than any other program in college basketball. Alone they would be just average, but put them on the court and the pieces start fitting together."

The idea of a basketball player serving as a catalyst is powerful. Catalysts are the unsung heroes of chemistry. Without them a group of individually insignificant molecules, that could form a valuable substance together, never break apart and form as one. The catalyzing agent is not used up in the reaction. It aids in the bonding process and then backs away without taking credit. In basketball, teams from powerhouse programs are filled with superstar talent, like chemicals with enormous potential, but are often devoid of anyone able to surrender their personal statistics or NBA prospects to become a catalyst for the team. On mid-major teams, players like Howard set off a chain reaction that raises the team to heights that are impossible on just the merits of its individual components.

A balanced scoring attack also has more practical advantages. Similar to Shaka Smart's Havoc defense detailed in the last section, a balanced team is more difficult to scout on short notice. Take Butler's Elite Eight opponent in 2011, Florida, as an example. One round before facing Butler, the Gators matched up with Brigham Young University, a mid-major led by a dynamic talent in Jimmer Fredette. Fredette averaged 28.9 points per game that season and was the 10th pick in the NBA draft. He was a superstar on the level of Hayward, Nash, or Lillard. But his dominance made BYU's offense predictable. The game plan could basically be boiled down to one sentence, "Don't let that kid shoot the ball." Florida had enough athleticism and enough talent to chase him around, sending double teams at every opportunity. Fredette was held to 3-of-15 from three-point range, and turned the ball over six times as Florida posted a comfortable

nine-point victory. The game ended around 10 p.m. March 24, leaving about 42 hours before a 4:30 p.m. tipoff March 26 against Butler. The athleticism and talent disparity was just as vast. The Gators had as many top-100 recruits coming off their bench as Butler had on its entire roster. But on such short notice, it's much harder to explain a complex motion offense where any of the five players on the opposing team can score. Without watching extensive film, how do you convince your big men that the "geeky band-camp RA" with turtleneck socks has three-point range?

Mid-major programs will never reach the Final Four because their rosters are stacked with the best players. For every diamond-in-the-rough talent they get, the traditional powerhouse opponent will trot out four or five players of the same caliber. But this can actually be a desirable disadvantage for small schools. For one, they won't need to worry about players leaving school early to chase NBA money. All five of our mid-major teams started at least three players who were seniors, and that experience and continuity became a big advantage during their tournament runs. And without the big egos attached to superstar talent, cohesion amongst players can be built. Over time, players can become catalysts, and catalysts can set off a chain reaction that raises a team to unforeseen heights. As Butler and Matt Howard prove, you don't need the best players, you just need the right ones.

IV. The Valley of Elah

In 1886, when Rev. Joseph Homer Parker was putting together plans for the establishment of a new college, he chose a hill north of the Arkansas River Valley overlooking a booming cowtown along the Chisholm Trail. The location was important, as Parker's vision was to give the members of his Plymouth Congregational Church and the abundance of local wheat farmers a cheaper alternative for higher education. And this was an excellent site. One early settler of the region had called it a "fair mount."

The area surrounding the hill Parker chose bears no resemblance to the Valley of Elah, where David met Goliath to do battle in the 11th century BCE. That region of ancient Palestine

was mountainous. The terrain there forced a stand-off, with the Philistine army camped on the southern ridge staring at the Israelite army camped on the northern ridge, neither wanting to descend into the valley and give up the advantage of high ground. That was the reason the Philistines sent Goliath down as their representative. The rest is history. Parker's hill, on the other hand, was surrounded by miles of flat farming land. Yet just like Elah, that specific land and the basketball courts that would one day be built on it became the perfect place to defeat a giant.

In 1895 the doors were opened for the first 30 students to attend classes at Fairmount College. In matching with the Christian values of its founder and the salt-of-the-earth nature of its students, the earliest recorded slogan for the school was "Fairmount builds character." Athletics at Fairmount were said to have begun on the second day of class, when a group of male students met under a tree to discuss forming a football team. It wasn't long before the school formed a rivalry in the sport with Chilocco Indian School, a Native American agricultural school located just south of Fairmount. In 1904, one of the Fairmount football team's student managers was making a sign to advertise the game between Fairmount and Chilocco when he encountered a problem. Their opponent was known as the Chilocco Indians, but his school didn't have a mascot. What would they be called?

There was really only one choice. Fairmount was a commuter school, with most students finding work harvesting—or "shocking"—wheat and dropping in and out of class whenever they had enough money. Football games were played on a flattened wheat field. So he gave the team the nickname "Wheatshockers." The school didn't officially recognize the mascot until after World War II, when a marine veteran and student Wilbur Elsea won a competition to design a mascot for the school and created an animated bundle of wheat named "WuShock." The nickname was shortened to "Shockers." To pay homage to the toughness of those local farmers, Elsea said "the school needed a mascot who gave a tough impression, with a serious, no-nonsense scowl." By then, Fairmount College had begun accepting public money, and in 1963 the Kansas legislature approved it as a state university. Wichita State University was born.

Unbeknownst to Rev. Parker, three years after the founding of Fairmount College and about 160 miles to the northeast, the University of Kansas hired a physical education teacher. His name was Dr. James Naismith. He had created a new game called "Basket Ball" at a YMCA in Springfield, Massachusetts that was exploding in popularity. The game soon caught on at nearby Fairmount, and by 1906 the Wheatshockers were playing basketball games in the basement of Fairmount Hall. Yet basketball was still an afterthought at the school. Fairmount was still very much known for football. A year prior, the school made history by hosting the first nighttime football game west of the Mississippi River. In the same season, a game between Fairmount and Washburn College was the first to experiment with using a forward pass and 10 yards as the distance needed for first downs. If Fairmount was known as anything, it was as a football school.

The scales began to flip in the middle of the 20th century, when the basketball team for the newly christened Wichita State reached the NCAA Tournament for the first time in 1964. The following season, they made it all the way to the Final Four. By starting five players who hailed from the state of Kansas and embodied the blue-collar attitude and toughness local residents took so much pride in, the basketball team began to win over the community. Wichita was becoming a basketball town.

Then tragedy struck. In 1970 a plane carrying half of the Wichita State football team crashed on its way to a game at Utah State, killing 31 of the 40 people on board including 14 football players. The incident rocked the program, and it never recovered. By the 1986 season, attendance at football games had dwindled to less than 10,000 fans per game, the second-lowest number since the opening of the stadium, and expenses for the year had outpaced revenue by $839,000. After the season, Wichita State President Warren Armstrong announced the school would be indefinitely suspending its football program. It hasn't returned.

Anyone who is familiar with college athletics knows losing a football program is a devastating blow. A 2017 study by Business Insider combed through the average revenue of all 127 schools that participate in football at the Football Bowl Subdivision level, those schools eligible to play for a national championship, in order to determine just how much schools rely on

their football teams to generate money. The results are startling. The football programs at these schools brought in an average of $31.9 million, while every other sport *combined* to bring in an average of $31.7 million. Men's basketball came in at around $8 million, almost four times less profitable. At the University of Texas, the highest earning school in the country from athletics with a ridiculous $182 million coming in per year, 70 percent of its revenue comes from the football program. That's over $127 million. Simply put, football is a college athletics department's cash cow.

In order to have a successful basketball team, a school needs one thing more than any other: money. Between 2010 and 2015, three of the five national champions in basketball ranked one, two, or three in the entire country in spending on its basketball program. Therefore one expects prospective basketball programs, those that might want to make a push to reach the Final Four, would pop up at big-time football schools. They are the ones with money. In truth, there isn't a single university in the country that would choose *not* having a profitable football program over having one. But the operative word there is "profitable." One USA Today study reports that while all 50 of the public universities participating in "power conferences" in football in 2013-2014 were self-sustaining, meaning the revenue they generated covers the cost of being competitive, just three FBS schools outside of those leagues hit the mark. In most cases, this cash flow is independent of wins and losses. Without the aid of lucrative television right's deals, which are set up on a conference-by-conference basis, many smaller schools need student fees and even taxpayer money to prop up its football programs.

That's the position Wichita State found themselves in when they cancelled football in 1986, and in subsequent attempts to restart the program. They learned in 1992 the football stadium needed $24 million in renovations. Four years later a report found it would take $11 million to restart the football program, and start up the three corresponding female sports programs needed to comply with Title IX regulations. Each time the issue has risen, it was clear football wasn't worth the price tag.

The thing is, the city of Wichita had money. An oil boom in the early 20th century gave way to a huge manufacturing industry in the city, particularly in air travel. Cessna Aircraft Company was founded and headquartered in the city, as well as Learjet's parent company Bombardier, Boeing's chief subassembly supplier Spirit AeroSystems, and over 50 other aviation businesses. The city is also home to Charles and David Koch, who founded and still operate Koch Industries, the second biggest privately-owned company in the United States. Each brother hovers around the top 10 of any richest people in the world list with a current net worth of around $60 billion. These are the type of guys who could spend Wichita State into becoming a national football powerhouse. But they didn't. They are smart business people, and they knew football wasn't a sound investment. It wasn't until 1999 that Jim Schaus gave them one.

When Schaus was hired as Wichita State's athletic director, the Shockers' basketball team was coming off a 12-17 season in which they finished dead last in the Missouri Valley Conference. That simply wasn't acceptable for Schaus, who prioritized growing the basketball program above all else. "I believed it was best to focus on the areas that you wanted to be great at the most," he said. "The primary focus was to get men's basketball back to a high level. The thought was, if we can do that, we'll be able to generate the resources that are necessary to run the rest of the program." Schaus knew what he wanted to do, and he knew how to do it. His first goal was a new basketball facility, and $25 million later the state-of-the-art Charles Koch Arena opened in 2003. The name is no coincidence. As corporate money from local businesses flowed in, Schaus' next push was for increased season ticket holders to fill the new arena. The Shockers have averaged better than 10,000 fans at every home basketball game since. It's easy to see why the school chose to support basketball. The same amount of money needed to make the football stadium passable had made the basketball arena one of the best in the entire country, and within three years the school had higher average basketball attendance for 15 or more home basketball games per year than they would get for a handful of football home games in a season.

Success on the court soon followed. Under head coach Mark Turgeon the Shockers made it to the Sweet 16 in 2006, the farthest they had advanced in 25 years. Schaus upped the ante next

by offering priority seating and parking at basketball games to season ticket holders for premium prices, and revenues continued to climb. Gregg Marshall was hired as head coach in 2007, and within three seasons he had won 25 games and reached the National Invitational Tournament, the second-most prestigious postseason event in college basketball. In his fourth season the Shockers won 29 games and were champions of the NIT. At that point they hardly even resembled a mid-major. With the help of a $4.6 million basketball budget that dwarfed the Missouri Valley competition, the Shockers flew private jets to every road game. "That is a great benefit," Marshall said, knowing very few mid-major programs in the country could boast the same luxury. "Our players don't understand how good they have it, to go from bus to private plane to bus and in a couple hours be in our hotel." It gave the team great flexibility in its scheduling. Marshall also used the planes to recruit around the country, allowing him to find under-recruited talents from Canada, the Bahamas, Nigeria, New York, Texas, Nevada, Georgia, Illinois, and Minnesota in addition to a few from Kansas. By the time the 2012-13 season rolled around, Wichita State was less of a miraculous underdog and more of a sleeping giant ready to make its presence known on the national stage.

The conclusion is simple. Schools like Wichita State could never hope to compete with bigger schools at every single sport, especially not at the high stakes sport of football. Football is a sport for Goliaths. By accepting it was a David, the school could pour all of its money into men's basketball, a sport where the barrier to entry is four times less expensive. It could compete on a more advantageous field of play. Basketball is a mid-major's Valley of Elah. It's the perfect place to slay a foe like Goliath.

The transformation that happened on a hill above the wheat fields of central Kansas might seem like an outlier. Wichita State basketball would not be where it is today if it were not located near Wichita, which has grown into the 50th largest city in the United States and became the type of place where people like the Koch brothers live. The team would not be cruising around in private jets if not for the city's thriving aerospace industry and the school's elite aerospace engineering program. And were it not for a devastating accident from one of those

planes leading to the abolishment of a football program, they never would've secured the primary focus and funds of their athletic director needed to become a national power. The stars seemed to have aligned for them. Until you take a look at our other mid-majors who made the Final Four and find some startling similarities.

Butler practically had its own Jim Schaus clone. Geoffrey Bannister, president of Butler from 1988 to 2000, masterminded a plan to pump money into the men's basketball program in order to use it as a marketing tool for the entire school. After all, Butler's football team was Division II at the time and wasn't making any money (they've since moved up to FCS, still a step below major college football and still not profitable). He presented a 25-page business blueprint focused around the sport in 1990, when the Bulldogs had posted 13 losing seasons in 16 years. Though exact numbers were not made public, budgets skyrocketed and Butler began winning. They've had winning records in 26 of the last 28 seasons. Momentum built as sponsorships came in from businesses and donors in nearby Indianapolis, the nation's 15th biggest city.

George Mason was the largest university in the state of Virginia in 2006, nearing 30,000 students. From an enrollment standpoint, the school was roughly the same size as the other three schools it faced in the Final Four. Any athletic director's eyes light up thinking about all those student fees. The school also sits just 20 miles outside of Washington D.C., the 21st biggest city in the United States. The big city provided fertile recruiting territory, and plenty of prospects that might fall through the cracks for bigger programs. That's how the Patriots were able to snag Will Thomas, the forward who went 7-0 in his high school career against Rudy Gay in the city's Catholic league. All five starters for George Mason in the Final Four were from the area. Despite its size, the school has never had a varsity football team. "Cost is the biggest issue," said Tom O'Connor, athletic director and assistant vice president at the school. "It is very costly to be successful in a spectator sport like football." The same goes for VCU. There's a saying that has been going around on its campus for decades. "VCU Rams Football, Still Undefeated." T-shirts are sold in the bookstore with the slogan across the chest. It's an inside joke, because the school

has never had a football team. In case you're wondering, Virginia Commonwealth is practically in downtown Richmond, Virginia, the 98th largest city in the country. Finally, Loyola University Chicago is a perfect test case in basketball's return on investment, even as the gap between the haves and the have-nots has widened in recent years. Their opponent in the 2018 Final Four was Michigan. Loyola's total athletics budget is $13.8 million. Michigan's is $153.2 million, over 11 times more. But when it comes strictly to basketball, the Ramblers spend close to $3 million compared to just under $17 million for the Wolverines. It's still a significant disparity, but when Loyola shut down its football team in 1929 due to the stock market crash, it unknowingly doubled its chances at competing. It goes without saying the school, located on the shores of Lake Michigan, is only about ten miles north of downtown Chicago, the nation's third-biggest city.

In the end, not being able to support a football team is a desirable disadvantage. It allows the playing field in college basketball to be leveled. It allows the battles in NCAA Tournaments to be fought in the Valley of Elah. We know what happens there.

The ultimate test of this formula is the 2013 NCAA Tournament itself. To college basketball analysts, Wichita State was a relatively unknown No. 9 seed from a mid-major conference. They were huge underdogs. But according to the money, the run was much less of a surprise. The Shockers biggest upset on this scale was actually their first round game over No. 8 seed Pittsburgh, and even then their $4.6 million in basketball expenses was competitive with the $7.3 million Pittsburgh spent. No. 1 Gonzaga in the next round wasn't too scary at $6.1 million (it bears mentioning here that Gonzaga built themselves from a mid-major into a powerhouse through the exact same formula shown above), and in the Sweet 16 Wichita State actually doubled the spending of surprise opponent La Salle's $2.0 million. Even in the Elite Eight, they could go toe-to-toe with No. 2 seed Ohio State and its $5.96 million without blinking. It wasn't until its Final Four game with Louisville that their budget was dwarfed by the $15.5 million the Cardinals' athletic department spent on the sport. Unsurprisingly, that's where the run ended.

Where do you find a mid-major program capable of sending a team to the Final Four? The formula is actually pretty simple:

Close proximity to one of the nation's top 100 biggest cities

+

Intentional funding from the athletic department

-

A money-sucking football program

=

Final Four Potential

V. Charging the Giant

There's a good reason why the media narrative surrounding the 2018 Loyola basketball team centered on its 98-year-old chaplain, Sister Jean Dolores-Schmidt. Her pregame prayers must have had some sort of magical powers. Is there any other way to explain how the No. 11 seed Ramblers, members of the Missouri Valley Conference, advanced all the way to the Final Four? Each of their first three tournament victories were sealed with an improbable shot in the final seconds of the game. In the opening round, Loyola trailed by one point with two seconds remaining when senior Donte Ingram sunk a shot from 30 feet, his feet touching the edges of the March Madness logo painted across half court, to stun No. 6 seed Miami (coached by Jim Larrañaga). Trailing by one point to No. 3 seed Tennessee in the second round, junior Clayton Custer took a heavily contested, off-balance jump shot from 15 feet in the closing seconds. He fell to the ground as he released the ball, and watched from the floor as it bounced off the front rim, ricocheted down off the backboard and rattled around the rim once again before eventually, impossibly, dropping in for the win. The Sweet 16 victory over No. 7 seed Nevada was sealed in the same fashion. A three-pointer from junior Marques Townes over a much taller defender on the final possession extended Loyola's lead from one point to four. Each individual shot was once-in-a-lifetime anomaly, and put together the wins formed an unquestionable miracle.

Up to this point, we've investigated the composition of mid-major teams capable of making it to the Final Four. Loyola checked all of the boxes. They had a coach who was an outsider, players who were catalysts and an administration that invested in the sport. All of those pieces are necessary. But there is one more element essential to the success of all these mid-major teams. It is perhaps the most important factor: performance. Sometimes, as Loyola proved in 2018, the difference between winning and losing comes down to making a single shot.

The science behind performance has fascinated psychologists for decades. Why is it that sometimes people are capable of performing to the absolute peak of their ability, and other times they are not? The most influential research in this area comes from a book published in 1975 by a Hungarian psychologist named Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. In it he invented the concept of "flow," a mental state in which people achieve both optimal performance and fulfillment through total immersion. In his own words, flow is "being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost." Athletes identify this phenomenon as "being in the zone." The key to achieving flow is remaining sufficiently challenged and stimulated by an activity, while at the same time staying fully confident that the goals of the activity are achievable.

For our mid-major teams, the first part of this equation is no problem. Taking on a heavily favored powerhouse team in the NCAA Tournament is extraordinarily challenging. Maintaining confidence is the more difficult proposition. In order to free players' minds from performance-hindering anxiety, our mid-majors employed what Csikszentmihalyi called "positive distractions." In 2006, George Mason coach Jim Larrañaga played wiffle ball with his team during a shootaround the week of the NCAA Touranment. In the locker room before the team's upset of North Carolina he told his players their opponents were like Supermen, and his team's green uniforms were the color of kryptonite. Then he pulled out a mini boombox and danced to the song "Kryptonite" by Big Boi and the Purple Ribbon Allstars. "Seeing Coach L doing that before a serious game, it got us all in a relaxed state of mind," George Mason forward

Folarin Campbell said. The antics continued before the win over Connecticut, when he told the team that CAA, the acronym for George Mason's conference, stood for Connecticut Assassins Association. The whole team burst out into laughter minutes before the biggest game of their lives. Similarly when the game was headed to overtime, Larrañaga's speech aimed to remove any negative thoughts that might be running through players' heads. "There isn't any place that I'd rather be than right here with you guys, trying to beat Connecticut with a chance to go the Final Four. Where else would you rather be?" Larrañaga said. "Are you having any fun yet? Go out and show the world what we're made of."

Unconventional motivational techniques were commonplace on Shaka Smart's VCU team in 2011 as well. After the team finished their regular season losing four of their last five games, Smart ripped out a calendar page for the month of February in front of the team, lit the page on fire and threw it in the trash. It was time to move on to March, he said. Before tournament games he showed his team video clips of television analysts' negative comments towards his team to fire them up, and once he even showed them clips of wild animals running down their prey, complete with the gruesome catch. In both cases, players performed with no doubt or fear. They elevated their level of play in the NCAA Tournament higher than it had been all season. They found their flow.

However, flow is an incomplete way of predicting NCAA Tournament success. It's helpful for teams, as it can raise level of play, but it's an equal opportunity ability for both Davids and Goliaths. Plenty of capable mid-major teams fit some or all of our specified criteria and haven't reached the Final Four, or even the second round. Shepherds like David are supposed to lose in fights with warriors like Goliath. In the last five NCAA Tournaments, underdogs—under the universally accepted definition of teams that are at least five seed lines below their opponent in the NCAA Tournament—have a record of 46-146, winning only about 24 percent of the time. Of those, games that were decided by more than five points fall in favor of the favorite 83 percent of the time. Fighting flow with flow is a losing battle.

Flow cannot explain what allowed Loyola to pull three consecutive NCAA Tournament upsets on game-winning shots in the final seconds. There's a subtle but very important distinction between "letting it happen," the autopilot mode described by flow, and "making it happen." The latter is often called "clutch," the state of mind you need when you have the ball in your hands with a shot to win an NCAA Tournament game. It requires maximum effort, rather than a feeling of effortlessness. In 2017, a group of Australian psychologists set out to explore this distinction, and more importantly study how athletes are able to perform in the clutch. They interviewed 26 athletes of varying age, gender, sport, nationality, and level of competition as soon as possible after an exceptional performance. They found that there was indeed a significant difference in athletic performance between flow and clutch mindsets, and that the clutch state was activated in a much different way than the flow state.

Loyola was remarkably clutch. How? As opposed to positive distractions, the study found athletes in the clutch state reported more "associative strategies" like setting microgoals and using positive, motivating self-talk. "These strategies appeared to help by mobilizing effort, focusing attention, and maintaining confidence," the study says. The Australian psychologists might as well have been describing Loyola basketball. Before each contest, head coach Porter Moser gave the team game goals independent of the final score, such as grabbing a certain number of offensive rebounds or making a certain percentage of free throw attempts. For example in the 2018 Missouri Valley championship game against Illinois State, a team that had made 10 and 12 three-point attempts against the Ramblers in the two regular season meetings, the challenge was to hold them to six or fewer three-pointers made. Moser, possessed always with a relentless positive energy and laser focus, used the phrasing "we *will* hold them to six threes" over and over when talking to the team before the game. The final box score showed Illinois State going 5-of-25 from three-point range, and Loyola advancing to the NCAA Tournament.

The team prepared thoroughly for every game situation. Moser was a meticulous planner, posting up to 15 poster-sized pieces of paper around the team's locker room holding the scouting

report on every aspect of an opponent and how to react to any possible scenario. Very little could surprise players. Ingram's seemingly desperate shot attempt off a missed shot against Miami was actually a designed play, named "Attack," that had contingency plans to account for any of Loyola's players grabbing a rebound. Even during the chaos of the final seconds, the players had microgoals. Dribble here, screen here, pass here. Ingram knew a shot was coming from the top of the key and could prepare to take it. "Any one of us could have hit that shot, but I was just fortunate enough to be in the position," Ingram said after the game. The quote sounds like humility. It's actually psychological game planning.

"Stuff like that [wiffle ball and setting calendars on fire], that's just not who we were, we hadn't done that all year," Moser said. "We just did what we always do, we prepared." The preparation left no room in players' minds for doubt or comparison to opponents. They had a job to do, and they took care of business.

However, shouldn't our Goliaths hold the advantage in clutch performance category as well? After all, their teams possess the more talented players and coaches, who should be capable of performing at a much higher level than their mid-major competition when both sides are putting in the maximum effort consistent with the "making it happen" mindset. But across our 192-game sample size in the past five NCAA Tournaments, underdogs have actually won 45 percent of games decided by five or fewer points. At 22 wins and 27 losses, these teams that are vastly inferior to their competition win almost as frequently as teams seeded five or more spots above them in close games. That's a remarkable statistic. Could being an inferior team really be a desirable disadvantage in the clutch? Dr. Jack Bowman, a sports psychologist and writer for mindplusmuscle.com, thinks there's no doubt.

"When you engage the underdog position, it automatically gives you a psychological and physiological advantage," he says. "These are some very powerful psychological effects that they're engaging here. This is stuff that actually gets the job done." Bowman says studies show underdogs produce a different type of hormone that gives them a "positive energy" as opposed to anxiety-causing adrenaline. "When you are in the underdog position, it activates a perceived lack

of pressure," he said. "'We're the underdogs, they're the ones feeling the pressure.' You hear that all the time. When you do that, it's much easier to focus on the process." After Custer hit his miraculous game-winner in Loyola's second round win over Tennessee, he basically parroted Bowman: "We're in the situation where we can go out there and play free and play the way we've been playing all year," Custer said. "We're a scary team if we're playing free and like we have nothing to lose. That's a big part of what we've been doing."

As it turns out, in clutch situations there are two powerful things working in favor of the underdog. The first is freedom from pressure. In the overtime period between George Mason and Connecticut in 2006, the Patriots made five of their six shots. They had absolutely nothing to lose. Connecticut, surprised and embarrassed and pressing to impose its will, made just two of eight shots. The second advantage is being underestimated. As we know, Goliath allowed David to charge at him because he was blind and arrogant, and was knocked out cold by a slung stone before he knew what was happening. During VCU's run in 2011, the Rams trailed by one point with seven seconds left in the Sweet 16 against Florida State. They had the ball underneath their own basket, and called one of their go-to inbounds plays. Florida State had scouted the play and responded by calling a timeout to draw up exactly what VCU was going to do. They assumed Smart would call the same play the second time around. He didn't, instead drawing up a new play in his team's huddle that began with players set up in the exact same formation as the previous play. He told inbounds passer Joey Rodriguez to wait four seconds and fake a high pass deep, where the original play would go, and then pass the ball low to Bradford Burgess who would sneak behind the defense towards the rim. Essentially, Smart was laying out microgoals. Then he told his team to trust the play, it was going to work. That's positive, motivating self-talk. The play ran perfectly according to script, and Burgess had a wide-open layup that sent VCU to the Elite Eight. VCU made it happen.

In the biblical description of the battle between David and Goliath, 1 Samuel 17:48 says, "As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him." He had nothing to lose. He was underestimated. That surprise won him the battle. David,

like our mid-majors, won the fight not only because of his unique abilities but also because of his fearlessness to charge the giant.

VI. Conclusion

As we return to the spring of 2006, try to imagine for a moment being on the George Mason basketball team. The Patriots played their home games in front of an average of 4,500 fans, and were lucky to have one nationally-televised game during their entire regular season. No one knew who Jai Lewis was, and few could identify Jim Larrañaga. No one had ever heard of George Mason. When the final buzzer sounded against Connecticut and players climbed on top of the media table to pump their jerseys out to the crowd, they were introducing the university to the entire world. At the Final Four they played in front of 43,000 fans at the RCA Dome in Indianapolis, with nearly 15 million people watching on television at home. Everyone knew their names. Underdog stories are inspirational. They're relatable. They're lovable. Everyone roots for David to topple Goliath. What many college basketball fans might not realize is a mid-major school's run to the Final Four is also transformative. The dozen or so members of the basketball team alter the course of a university forever. Millions of dollars and thousands of lives are affected.

The first and most obvious example of this impact comes in the form of direct payment to the basketball programs. The NCAA distributes reward money to its conferences based on the number of NCAA Tournament games they appeared in each year. These "units" vary in price each season, but for mid-major conferences the money is substantial. For example, Loyola Chicago's five units in 2018 earned the Missouri Valley Conference $8.5 million. The money is then divided evenly amongst the member schools and given out across six years, equaling about $140,000 per school per year in this case. That's more money than any of the schools receive from the conference's television rights deal with ESPN. It's no coincidence Loyola Chicago, which joined the Missouri Valley the same year member school Wichita State made it to the Final Four in 2013, had the resources necessary to make the Final Four within the six-year

window. Or that VCU's 2011 run out of the Colonial Athletic Association came within six years of George Mason earning five units in 2006.

The direct payments are just the tip of the iceberg. In 2012, an assistant professor at Harvard Business School set out to measure the effect of a highly visible athletic success on a university, popularly referred to as the "Flutie Effect." The term comes from Boston College experiencing a swell in applications interest after a 1984 football game in which quarterback Doug Flutie threw a game-winning Hail Mary pass on the final play. The study found not only were there 30 percent more applications within two years of the game, the applicants had higher test scores and came mostly from out-of-state, where tuition costs were much higher. The school had added to its academic prestige, and had more money to reinvest in the school to continue the growth, totally separate from the athletic department. Thanks to one pass from Flutie, Boston College students received a better education for decades after he left the school. The football program raised its profile as well. Within a decade they had gone from being an independent to a member of the Big East Conference, sending them on a track that eventually landed them in the mighty ACC in 2005. Prior to Flutie's season, Boston College football had won one bowl game in its entire history. They've won 12 since.

Our mid-major schools can boast similar results. George Mason commissioned one of its business professors to study the effects of its Final Four run. He reported $677 million in free publicity during the tournament. In the two years following the run, admissions inquiries increased 350 percent, while applications increased by 22 percent and out-of-state applications numbers were up 40 percent. A $100 million capital campaign launched after the 2006 tournament exceeded $132 million in donations. The basketball program was never the same. Season ticket sales for basketball home games doubled in one year. They joined the Atlantic 10 conference in 2013, a much more prestigious league, and currently operate with an athletics budget twice as big as they did in 2006.

Butler's total applications rose a mind-boggling 52 percent from 2009 to 2011 after two consecutive trips to the national championship game. The school commissioned its own study,

and found the two runs combined for over $1.2 billion in free media publicity. That's not all. "Our corporate sponsors have grown significantly, which is attributable to our success in 2010 and 2011," said Barry Collier, Butler's director of athletics. "Licensing has jumped somewhere in the neighborhood of 350 percent." The Bulldogs competed in the Horizon League when they made their two runs, but jumped to the Atlantic 10 and then the Big East in 2013, a legitimate power conference. Today, with a basketball budget approaching $6 million, Butler resembles Goliath far more than it does David.

Stories like these abound for all of our teams. "I was talking with someone who works with our admissions," said Loyola Chicago athletic director Steve Watson only about a month after his team appeared in the 2018 Final Four, "and he said we're going to have to change everything, blow up our model; this is going to change the way we do business forever." On the athletics side, Wichita State jumped from the Missouri Valley to the American Athletic Conference and is a perennial powerhouse. VCU hopped from the Colonial to the Atlantic 10. Bigger conferences mean bigger television contracts, which means more money. More money means better facilities, better recruiting, and better coaching. Those things translate into more wins and more exposure. The cycle continues.

Who will be the next mid-major school to experience these effects? In this paper we've assembled a set of criteria the prospective school needs to follow: a coach who's an outsider, players who are catalysts, an administration that supports the basketball program and a fearless attitude. Though not black and white rules we've found benchmarks for each aspect: the coach shouldn't have played high level Division I basketball or be an assistant coach for a long time under a hall of famer, none of the players should average more than 16 points per game, the school shouldn't have a football program, and the team should win close games to prove their clutch ability. The final question is whether these criteria can predict future mid-major runs to the Final Four. Only time will tell, but here are three schools that fit the profile.

Grand Canyon University is a school of about 19,000 on-campus students located about seven miles north of downtown Phoenix, the fifth largest city in the United States. Until 2013, its

athletics teams competed at the Division II level. It has never made an appearance in the NCAA Tournament. Yet Grand Canyon is a perfect David. As the only for-profit school in all of Division I, money is no issue for the Antelopes. Its basketball team had a $4.34 million budget for the fiscal year of 2016, which if you're keeping track is already quite a bit higher than Wichita State's budget in 2013, or any of our other mid-major schools for that matter. With that money the school is recruiting heavily overseas, finding talented players that can't be poached by more prestigious schools. And that number doesn't take into account a $1 billion campus expansion project that includes a massive new basketball practice facility and 2,000 more seats to the arena it plays in, where they sell out every game. It's no surprise the basketball program is well funded, because Grand Canyon does not have a football team. As for coaching, head coach Dan Majerle might not seem like an outsider at first glance considering he played 14 years in the National Basketball Association. He is. His college basketball experience was at Central Michigan, a definite mid-major, and his only coaching job prior to taking over at Grand Canyon was as an assistant for the Phoenix Suns in the NBA. He comes to the college game with an NBA perspective, a style far different than the college basketball lifers. The leading scorer on the 2017-2018 Grand Canyon Antelopes? That would be Alessandro Lever at 12.2 points per game. Five players averaged between nine and 12 points. A run to the Final Four might shock the college basketball world, as the team competes in the Western Athletic Conference. It shouldn't.

Another candidate is the University of Pennsylvania, competing out of the Ivy League. The league might have been a power in the middle of the 20th century, when Penn made a Final Four appearance in 1979. It's not now. The Ivy League has only advanced past the second round of the tournament one time in three decades. According to the college basketball ratings percentage index, it was ranked as the 24th best league in the country out of 32 total conferences. With a $1.8 million budget, Penn is definitely an underdog. But there's a lot to like for the Quakers. They are led by Steve Donahue, who played college basketball and baseball at Ursinus College, a Division III school northwest of Philadelphia. He coached in the high school and Division II ranks before taking an assistant job at Penn for 10 years. Then he then took the reigns

as head coach of Cornell for 10 years, where in 2010 he led the team that made the Ivy League's only Sweet 16 since 1979. He took a high profile job at Boston College in the ACC, but didn't much fit in as a Goliath. He was fired after four years, and returned to Penn. Just like Shaka Smart, Donahue rattles teams with his tempo. Instead of speeding up the game he slows it down to a glacial pace, which doesn't allow more talented teams the opportunities to take advantage. Finding catalysts shouldn't be a problem for Donahue. In recent years he has adopted a motto for his team: Whānau. It's a Maori word for extended family, which he picked up from *The Legacy*, a book about the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team. The word symbolizes the culture of the Penn program, setting aside all personal egos to help out your teammates. The proof is in the construction of Penn's roster. There are 21 players on the team. He sees all of them as important. Not only did Penn have four players in double-digit scoring on the season with none more than 14 points per game, but it was the only team in the country which had eight different players score 20 or more points in a single game. That's textbook catalyst behavior. And Penn's location is its greatest asset. It is situated in downtown Philadelphia, the sixth largest city in the United States and a hotbed for grassroots basketball talent. Its historic basketball arena, the Palestra, has often been called "The Cathedral of College Basketball" since opening its doors in 1927. Penn is able to attract large schools to come play at the Palestra during the regular season to boost its profile and NCAA Tournament résumé, a luxury few mid-major teams in the country can claim. Momentum for the program is building towards something special, potentially even a trip to the Final Four.

The final contender is Lipscomb University, a private liberal arts school of less than 5,000 students out of the Atlantic Sun Conference. For a school of that size, supporting a football team is completely out of the question. The Bison made their first NCAA Tournament appearance in the school's history in 2018. The school is located a stone's throw away from Nashville, Tennessee, the 24th largest and one of the fastest growing cities in the country. Though Nashville has plenty of competition from a three other Division I basketball programs in the city, the potential for economic impact is enormous. Head coach Casey Alexander played

college basketball at nearby Belmont University, a mid-major school, and learned how to be a David from one of the greatest mid-major coaches in college basketball history, Rick Byrd, for 16 seasons. Lipscomb plays at a blistering pace, the fifth fastest in all of college basketball according to leading analytics expert Ken Pomeroy's tempo metric. The only reason its players average more than 15 points per game is the team's up-tempo style. It's difficult for any opponent to keep up. In the 2018 conference championship game that sent them to the NCAA Tournament, the Bison scored 108 points. With a few more successful seasons under its belt, Lipscomb could become a mid-major capable of a deep run in March as well.

When any of these teams, or other mid-majors not mentioned here, does make it to the Final Four next, it won't be because of magic or coincidence. It will be because the schools have desirable disadvantages. They won't have enough money to play America's most popular and most profitable sport, football. Their coaches will be people who never fit in. Their playing style will be strange and disorienting. Their players won't be superstars, and may even wear turtleneck socks and greasy hair. They'll almost certainly be underestimated. For these reasons and many more, these teams are fun to cheer for. But supporting the teams means much more than basketball. Success on the court can transform the lives of thousands of young people that can't dribble a ball or even tell the difference between Shaka Smart and Shaka Zulu. It's why the stories of mid-major basketball teams, just like David and Goliath, should be told forever.

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